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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 NEW DELHI 000264

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SUBJECT: BOMB BLASTS SHAKE BHUTAN

Classified By: PolCouns Ted Osius for reasons 1.4 (B,D)

(C) 1. Summary: On January 20, four bombs detonated in four separate districts in Bhutan, including in the capital, Thimphu. No deaths were reported but a woman was injured and property damaged. The blasts occurred days after the Election Commission of Bhutan (ECB) announced National Assembly polls would be held on March 24, marking Bhutan's shift from absolute to constitutional monarchy. The United Revolutionary Front of Bhutan (URFB), an organization formed in April 2007, claimed responsibility for the blasts in an email. However, neither the press nor the Bhutanese Embassy have confirmed this claim. Many theories about the URFB are brewing but very little is actually known about this new group except that it appears to support the cause of Bhutanese refugees in Nepal. End Summary.

Four Bombs Detonate, Fifth Found

12. (SBU) On January 20, four bomb blasts across the southern and central regions of Bhutan took place over the span of three hours between 11 AM and 2 PM (local time). The first blast occurred near a vegetable market in the Samste district, bordering the Indian states of Sikkim and West Bengal. The second bomb exploded in the capital, Thimphu, shattering window panes and unnerving shopkeepers and residents. The third blast occurred in Chukha district, also bordering West Bengal, where ricocheting splinters wounded a woman in the leg. The fourth took place in Dagana in southwest Bhutan. Police found a fifth explosive device in Dagana which did not detonate. Overall damage included one injured and property damage to shops and businesses, but no deaths.

Taking Responsibility

13. (C) The Royal Bhutan Police suspect the explosions are linked to one of three well-known insurgent organizations based in Nepal -- the Bhutan Tigers Force (BTF), the Bhutan Maoists Party (BMP), and the Communist Party of Bhutan (CPB). However, Washington agencies and Embassy have seen an email dated January 21 from the United Revolutionary Front of

Bhutan (URFB) taking responsibility for the bomb blasts. When asked about the URFB, officials from the Royal Bhutanese Embassy pointed to the usual suspects identified by the Royal Bhutan Police and offered no extra comment on the URFB. On January 23, Bhutan national newspaper Kuensel's Editor in Chief Kinley Dorji told Poloff that he believed Bhutanese officials received correspondence from the URFB claiming it was behind the blasts. However, he noted that no one in Bhutan has heard of this group before.

Who is the URFB?

14. (SBU) According to the email correspondence and the URFB website (<http://urfb.org/home/index.php>), the organization formed in April 2007. In its email declaration in which it took responsibility for the bombing, the URFB denounced the Bhutanese election as being unfair and a farce of democracy. They claimed the disqualification of the Bhutan People's United Party (BPUP) is a ploy to protect the King's "hegemonic" rule over the country through two "puppet" political parties that are both under his control. The URFB, while recognizing the "magnanimous gesture" of the U.S. and other countries offering aid and the option of resettlement to Bhutanese refugees in camps in Nepal, asserted that the resettlement proposals allow and "encourage a despot to evict the people who pose a challenge to its authority and power." The Front urged India to take a stand against Bhutan and demanded that human rights, citizenship rights, political rights and the problem of Bhutanese refugees in Nepal must be resolved before elections can take place. The URFB vowed to fight through armed struggle and abolish what it describes as

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an autocratic power in order to establish a people's democracy.

More Maoist Trouble

15. (C) Dr. Ajai Sahni, a counter-terrorism expert at the Institute for Conflict Management in Delhi, believes the incidents are the handiwork of Maoists. He told Poloffs that he had not heard about the URFB before and knew very little about the group. However, he speculated that the URFB might be a faction of one of the three known groups (CPB, BTF, and BMP), a unification of the three known groups operating under a new name, or a completely new operation. Sahni claimed he has been expecting an incident of violence in Bhutan and pointed to the indigenous Maoists whom he indicated are backed by both the Indian and Nepali Maoists. He related that Nepali and Indian Maoists helped form the Bhutan Maoist Party. However Indian Maoists now have decreased their engagement with Bhutanese Maoists. He asserted that while the attacks have been of low intensity with no fatalities, the point behind the bombings is aimed at frightening people and recruiting more members through a display of power. On whether the bomb blasts could be linked to the United Liberation Front of Assam (ULFA), which the fourth King physically expelled from Bhutan in December 2003, Sahni said that if a connection does not exist now, it will in the near future. He also alleged that ULFA has strong connections with Nepali Maoists and is operating transitional training camps in Nepal.

16. (C) Sahni expressed confidence in the Bhutanese capacity to contain disruptive elements currently within the country. As supporting evidence, he alluded to the arrest and sentencing of 30 people in May 2007 after a series of bombings in Bhutan last year.

Comment: Theories Abound

17. (C) Bhutanese officials have repeatedly expressed concern to Emboffs regarding violent anti-monarchy organizations

based in Nepal trying to disrupt the election process and the transition to democracy. These organizations, including the BTF, BMP, and CPB have all threatened to derail the upcoming democratic process in Bhutan. Not much is known about the URFB at this time. However, given the geographic location of the blasts (the southern region of Bhutan), some probable theories could include:

--they are another Nepal-based organization with support from Nepali Maoists and connected to the CPB, BTF, and MPB and the Bhutanese refugees of Nepali-origin;

--the proximity to the Indian border, and ULFA's previous but short-lived use of Bhutan in the past as a base for operations, also suggests the ULFA could be providing support to the URFB in hopes of regaining control of old ULFA bases;

or

--someone with no connections to any established, known group has jumped into the mix.

18. (C) Though the National Council elections in December 2007 went off without a hitch, Bhutan must take appropriate security measures to ensure a similarly smooth political exercise in March 2008. End Comment.

19. (U) This cable was coordinated with Kathmandu and Kolkata.
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